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# The key to successful integration of refugees in Germany

Language skills, housing, work, social participation

Simone Christ \ BICC

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## Policy recommendations

### \ Grant integration policy measures to all refugees from the outset— independently of their “prospects of remaining” (*Bleibeperspektive*) in Germany

The prospect of remaining in the country is a bureaucratic categorisation that conflicts with the assessment of each person's reasons for leaving their homes. It creates inequalities among refugees and restricts integration. Federal policy and legislation must stop grouping people into those with “good” or “bad” prospects of remaining and grant all access to integration policy measures from the outset.

### \ Enabling participation—Through language skills, on the labour market and by providing support

The integration of refugees through language skills and work is of pivotal importance. Federal politics must create a legal basis that enables language and integration courses from the outset and also take into account differences arising from gender, age or educational background. After having abolished the so-called labour market test (*Vorrangprüfung*) or prioritisation of access to employment in 2019, the domicile requirement (*Wohnsitzauflage*) adopted in 2016 must also be lifted. Adequate support by social workers must be provided at the local level.

### \ Understand the housing situation as an essential factor behind integration

Having your own apartment is an important step towards an independent life. At the local level, accommodation in flats or self-contained units is preferable to shared accommodation. The state of North Rhine-Westphalia and other federal states must adhere to their policy of not establishing central housing for asylum applicants who have to stay there until their asylum application has been granted (so-called AnKER centres) as these isolate the inhabitants, cause conflicts and impede integration.

### \ Reduce restrictions on family reunification

Refugees often live apart from their family. Some family members, for example, have not left the conflict area. Restrictions on family reunification can hinder integration, as they create a variety of financial and psychological burdens for the people affected. The federal states should work at the federal level to reduce the restrictions on family reunification.

# The key to successfully integrating refugees in Germany: Language skills, housing, work, social participation

## Summary

This *Policy Brief*, based on the results of research conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia<sup>1</sup>, makes suggestions on how to bring about the successful integration of refugees<sup>2</sup>. At this point, it is not only the state, but above all the federal and local political level that share a responsibility to implement (legislative) measures. The author understands integration as participation in society that is as equitable as possible for all people. Integration, therefore, does not refer exclusively to migrants or refugees but includes all people or groups of people who are excluded from certain social, economic or political areas (Pries, 2015). It is a process of encounter and exchange, not a unilateral adaptation by migrants. Socio-political challenges—such as long-standing problems on the housing market or in the school system—can make equal participation more difficult. However, solutions must be found here that involve not only refugees but all sections of the population.

The recommendations presented here are based on the research results of a qualitative study on the integration processes of people who have sought refuge in North Rhine-Westphalia. The basis for almost two years of field research were interviews conducted with experts and refugees as well as participant observation in a refugee shelter. The experiences of people who fled to Germany 20 to 40 years ago were related to those of refugees who have arrived since 2014. The study examines how refugees' arrival in Germany is organised, how they perceive their lives in Germany, what challenges they face in their everyday lives (Christ, 2019) and what effects asylum legislation at the federal level and the practical implementation of integration policy measures at the local level have on their lives.

## Integration policy measures for all refugees from the outset—regardless of their "prospects of remaining" in Germany

For a long time, integrating forced migrants, asylum seekers and refugees had not been on the political agenda. Looking at German asylum policy and legislation from a historical perspective, one can see that the government intended to only temporarily host people who had fled their home country for the duration of the war there. They were to be provided for, but their permanent social, political, economic and cultural integration was not planned. Language integration existed at best as voluntary services offered by municipalities or welfare associations, and access to the labour market was denied to them. This changed in around 2015. For refugees, having to wait resulted in lifetime lost. At the same time, their capabilities and talents were not available to the German labour market either.

Compared to the situation of those who fled to Germany 20 to 40 years ago, some legal regulations have improved considerably. For example, the German Integration Act of 2016 removed some of the previous bureaucratic obstacles to the labour market. However, asylum seekers with "good prospects of remaining" and recognised refugees are the only groups that are allowed access to the labour market. Those whose deportation has been temporarily suspended, for instance, may only remain in Germany for the duration of their vocational training or, if they had been working for 18 months for 35 hours a week subject to social security contributions. People from "safe countries of origin" who entered the country after 30 August 2015 are generally banned from employment.

1 \ This *Policy Brief* is a translation of *Policy Brief 5* that was published in March 2019. This version has been slightly updated, status February 2020

2 \ The term "refugee" is used in this *Policy Brief* when it refers to people who have applied for asylum in Germany and to people who refer to themselves as refugees.

Only those originating from a country of origin where the approval rate of asylum applications of its nationals in Germany is higher than 50 per cent (total protection rate) have "good prospects of remaining" in Germany. These nationals alone currently have access to integration courses. Such a formal, statistics-based categorisation clashes with an individual assessment of the reasons for fleeing one's country of origin. It results in the fact that people are excluded from integration measures for a long time, even if they are later recognised as refugees. Even today, refugees feel that they have lost part of their lifetime because they were excluded from integration measures. This exclusion remains a disadvantage for society as a whole, as it cannot profit from the potential of skilled workers.

Federal policy and legislation, therefore, ought to stop the grouping into people with "good" or "bad" prospects of remaining and grant all refugees access to integration policy measures from the outset. Federal state governments should also withdraw their decisions to change the reception system for controlling refugees seeking asylum according to the criterion of "good prospects of remaining".

## **Removing restrictions on access to the labour market**

Although many refugees wish to be able to earn their living as soon as possible, there are numerous restrictions on access to the labour market. Asylum seekers have only been allowed to work after three months as a rule since 2014. The prioritisation of access to employment has a restrictive effect—asylum seekers may only take up work if no German or EU citizen can be found. In the past, this meant that asylum seekers and those whose deportation has been temporarily suspended were in fact not permitted to work. With the Integration Act of 2016, this prioritisation was suspended for three years in most of the districts of the Federal Employment Agency; with the exceptions in North Rhine-Westphalia of Dortmund, Bochum, Recklinghausen, Gelsenkirchen, Oberhausen, Duisburg and Essen. In 2019, the German legislature lifted the prioritisation of access to employment.

In the interest of integration, the federal and state levels should counter possible competition on the labour market with structural policy measures, especially in municipal business development, which includes all sections of the population. The domicile requirement also restricts the integration of recognised refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and persons with a 'residence permit due to an obstacle to deportation' into the labour market. Since 2016, they have not been allowed to choose their place of residence freely for the first three years after their residence permit was issued. This can have further negative social consequences, such as making it more difficult to support family members. Federal policy should not extend the domicile requirement.

## **Responses to conflict-induced involuntary transnational family life: Family reunification and day-to-day support**

People who have fled their homes not only live in one municipality in Germany. Their everyday lives are often organised on a transnational scale, as many families were involuntarily separated by displacement: Some relatives remain in the conflict area or live as internally displaced persons in refugee camps or in the region, while others have found refuge in EU countries, for example. Often only one parent takes the risk of fleeing in the hope that the family can join them later. The concern for relatives in war and crisis regions or refugee camps is a constant companion for many refugees in Germany.

Integration and a transnational life are not mutually exclusive but are related in many ways. For example, the obligation to support family members in crisis regions or refugee camps may result in the fact that refugees accept jobs in the low-wage sector to earn money as quickly as possible, rather than taking up training opportunities that would be better paid in the long-run.

To promote integration and protect the family unit, the restriction on family reunification must be lifted at the federal political level. After the restriction of

family reunification for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection for two years until summer 2018, family reunification is restricted to a maximum of 1,000 persons per month (February 2020). But it is precisely the restrictions on family reunification that can hamper integration, as the people affected perceive the separation from their family members as a high psychological burden.

Integration policies at the state and local level can address the transnational reality of the life of displaced people by improving their day-to-day support of individuals, e.g. in deciding between training measures or jobs in the low-wage sector or in providing psycho-social support.

## **Language skills and appropriate housing conditions enable participation**

Alongside gainful employment, many refugees see language skills and their housing situation as central to their settling in Germany (Christ, 2019). For them, language is the key to all areas of society: Be it the labour market (Wiedner, Salikutluk & Giesecke, 2018, p. 2), communication with authorities or institutions of everyday life (e.g. the children's school or kindergarten) or when establishing local social contacts. Moreover, a language course can help to regain a regular daily structure and to escape from the permanent state of waiting—for an appointment at the BAMF or the asylum decision, for example.

Irrespective of the prospects of remaining in Germany, municipalities must, therefore, ensure that refugees have access to language courses. These courses offered must also take into account their different educational backgrounds. It is also helpful to use easy language for official regulations or official decisions, which would also benefit other social groups. Should the language skills of refugees not yet be sufficient, local authorities, in particular, should provide interpreters, for example, in the health sector.

Especially when refugees have just arrived in Germany, the housing situation can be very stressful. They are allocated to collective housing, where they have to live with strangers for an indefinite period of time, where they have little space and hardly any room for privacy. Conflicts are, therefore, often inevitable (Christ, Meininghaus & Röing, 2019). Depending on their legal status and the situation of the local housing market, some people may have to live in shared accommodation for years. Many asylum seekers see the move into their own flat as a first step towards returning to an independent and self-responsible life. The two groups studied (people who fled to Germany 20 to 40 years ago and those who have fled to Germany since 2014) agree on this (Christ, 2019).

Since August 2018, so-called AnkER centres have been established in Bavaria, Saxony and Saarland. These are large reception centres for asylum seekers that house up to 1,500 people. They have to stay there for 18 months, with the exception of families with children under the age of 18, and all stages of the asylum procedure are to take place there. The majority of the federal states, including NRW, reject the establishment of AnkER centres and should not introduce them in the future either, as they lead to isolation rather than integration of the inhabitants and present a great potential for conflict.

At the municipal level, too, flats should be preferred to shared accommodation, provided that the local property market allows it. However, it must be ensured that, if necessary, support by social workers is still provided.

## Integration processes differ from person to person—Adapt integration policies

Structural legal prerequisites influence integration processes, while differences, such as gender, age, ethnicity/nationality or social class or stratum also have an impact on integration.

It makes a big difference whether children, teenagers or adults have fled to Germany. For adults, it is more difficult to learn the language and find a job appropriate to their education than for children and young people who pass through the German educational system. Children often interpret for their parents if these do not understand the language well enough, but this can be an overtaxing situation for the children depending on the situation. Using professional interpreters at the municipal level, especially in dealing with public authorities or during visits to doctors or clinics, is highly recommended.

Moreover, integration is a gendered process. The expectations in Germany, but also in the respective countries of origin, influence the understanding of women's roles, especially that of mothers. More often than not, the strategy of the families is to send the men into the public space, while the women stay at home with the children in their private space. Men are supposed to learn the language first and then try to find a job in the labour market. The educational background of the wives does not play a role in this decision; even well-educated women remain at home with the children for an indefinite period. The lack of childcare facilities, such as sufficient kindergarten places or language courses with childcare, exacerbates this unequal situation.

Furthermore, depending on which social strata refugees come from, they can favour or hinder opportunities for integration. Well-trained asylum seekers who integrate more quickly into the labour market and

earn higher wages have a better chance of obtaining a settlement permit under the German Integration Act of 2016. This, in fact, means that labour market needs take precedence over humanitarian considerations. Policymakers must recognise that integration processes are different and thus provide the best possible level playing field for all people who have fled to Germany. At the local level, concrete measures, such as expanding childcare or providing language courses for all adults can help achieve this. Immigration authorities should take account of the fact that people who do not meet integration requirements for demonstrable reasons (e.g. serious psychological problems) are not disadvantaged when granting a settlement permit.

## Conclusion: Understanding integration as participation for all people

Insufficient assistance is an obstacle to integration for many refugees. In many municipalities, there was hardly sufficient support by social workers for the specific needs of refugees in 2015/2016. After a temporary increase, the local authorities again cut funds in these areas and cut jobs, also in the crucial area of volunteer coordination. Intensive assistance is not only essential in the early stages, but also later, for example when looking for accommodation and jobs or deciding on the appropriate educational path for their children. To this end, sufficient support by social workers must be guaranteed at the local level.

Volunteers, who are often in close personal contact with asylum seekers, do an outstanding job. Their help is vital when supporting refugees in finding work or education or in overcoming the obstacles involved in finding a place to live. Nevertheless, the work of volunteers has its limits. On the one hand, these limits include the time the volunteers are prepared to spend on supporting refugees and their personal resilience. On the other, possible paternalism and social selection (better-educated asylum

seekers are more likely to receive support by volunteers, see Erler, Prytula, & Grotheer, 2018) can be detrimental. Volunteers should also see that they support the agency of the displaced themselves, for example in migrant self-organisations or other voluntary support groups, thereby giving them more co-determination concerning their own interests (cf. Karakayali, 2018).

In principle, integration should mean participation for all people. This means that social measures must not only be open to refugees but must also take account of the needs of the neighbourhood. Inclusive measures in communities, such as toddler groups that can be used by all parents, promote mutual understanding and exchange. In this sense, language courses that are accessible to all people without sufficient knowledge of German also promote integration. Official German in easy language can not only make everyday life easier for refugees, but also for people with limited reading skills. Labour market policies should also be inclusive, addressing both refugees and other vulnerable groups in society.



## FURTHER READING

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